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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes research on the instructional role of the principal and its implications for at-risk students, with a focus on principal-teacher interaction. Principals who demonstrate effective instructional leadership and help at-risk students are able to meet students' and teachers' basic/instructional, academic/professional, and affective needs. In schools where at-risk students are achieving success, principals: (1) support teachers' instructional methods; (2) allocate resources and materials; (3) make frequent visits to classrooms for instructional purposes; (4) solicit and provide feedback on instructional methods and techniques; and (5) use data to focus attention on improving the curriculum or instructional approach. (LMI)

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Issues . . . *about Change*

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The Principal's Role in the Instructional Process: Implications for At-Risk Students

What is it, specifically, that instructional leaders do that is most effective for students in at-risk situations? How do principals exhibit high expectations or display an instructional focus? What exactly do they do that results in academic gains for students at risk? At schools where at-risk students are making academic gains, effective principals do for teachers what effective teachers do for students.

In studies of effective schools with high numbers of minority and low socioeconomic status students, characteristics commonly used to describe students at risk, specific leadership behaviors have been found. These actions can be classified into three realms of interactions: between the principal and teachers; between the principal and the community, students, and parents; and between the principal and the central office. An examination of these complex and complicated occurrences reveals that these areas are rarely discrete, overlap in some aspects, and intersect in others. However, each will be examined separately in *Issues ... about Change*. The focus of this particular issue is the interactions between the principal and teachers.

What Works with At-Risk Students

We know how to meet the basic, academic, and affective needs of at-risk students. Similarly we know how successful principals demonstrate instructional leadership practices. Effective practices and programs for at-risk students and instructional leadership behaviors have been documented (Brookover & Lezotte 1979; Greenfield, 1987; Haycock, 1990; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). Research concerning effective instruction for at-risk students parallels the research concerning effective instructional leadership. Programs that meet students' basic needs such as providing assistance in acquiring social and health services are analogous to instructional leaders meeting teachers' basic instructional needs when they provide teachers with adequate and appropriate teaching materials. Meeting students' academic needs such as basic skills development with Chapter 1 programs is similar to principals meeting teachers' professional needs with staff development in specific instructional areas. Affective needs of at-risk students are addressed with effective instruction programs such as cooperative learning which help in reducing a sense of alienation and promote student collaboration. Likewise principals attend to teachers' affective needs such as building a sense of community when the principals include faculty members in developing a "shared meaning" of the school's vision, mission, and goals.

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is a significant factor in facilitating, improving, and promoting the academic progress of students. A litany of characteristics has been identified from research studies on school improvement and

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instructional leader effectiveness, including high expectations of students and teachers, an emphasis on instruction, provision of professional development, and use of data to evaluate students' progress. At first glance, these behaviors appear to be merely a partial list of effective schools research findings on instructional leaders. Yet when we examine what works with at-risk students, the old adage, "the whole is larger than the sum of its parts," applies to the power these actions have for improving achievement among at-risk students.

The literature about leadership frequently distinguishes between managers and leaders by stating that a manager does things right and a leader does the right things (Bennis, 1989; Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Additionally, a leader is characterized as the vision holder, the keeper of the dream, or the person who has a vision of the purpose of the organization. Bennis (1990) believes that leaders are the ones who "manage the dream" (p. 46). Leaders have not only a vision but the skills to communicate that vision to others, to develop a "shared covenant" (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 216). They invite and encourage others to participate in determining and developing the vision. "All leaders have the capacity to create a compelling vision, one that takes people to a new place, and the ability to translate that vision into reality" (Bennis, 1990, p. 46). In *Leadership Is an Art* (1989), De Pree writes that "the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader is a servant" (p. 9). Leaders become servants to the vision; they work at providing whatever is needed to make the vision a reality. They gather the resources, both human and material, to bring the vision to reality.

Principals in schools where at-risk students are achieving practice the skills and apply the knowledge of effective instructional leadership. They have a vision — a picture of what they want students to achieve. They engage teachers, parents, students and others to share in creating the vision. They encourage them to join in the efforts to make that vision a reality. They keep the vision in the forefront by supporting teachers' instructional efforts and by guiding the use of data to evaluate the progress of the school.

Instructional Leaders of At-Risk Students

Principals become servants to their vision of success for all students. They convey this vision to teachers, students, and parents through their actions. Because the interactions between teachers and students are critical, how principals influence this aspect of the educational process is important. Principals participate in the instructional process through their discussions with teachers about instructional issues, their observations of classroom instruction, and their interactions with teachers when examining student data.

Although there are points of convergence in these actions, it is helpful to divide them into three categories: instructional focus, instructional evaluation, and monitoring of student progress. Instructional focus behaviors demonstrated by effective principals include support of teachers' instructional methods and their modifications to the approach or materials to meet students' needs, allocation of resources and materials, and frequent visits to classrooms. Instructional evaluative actions of principals include making frequent visits to classrooms as well as soliciting and providing feedback on instructional methods and materials. They also include using data to focus attention on ways to improve curriculum and instructional approaches and to determine staff development activities that strengthen

teachers' instructional skills. When monitoring progress, effective principals focus on students' outcomes by leading faculty members to analyze student data, to evaluate curriculum and instructional approaches, and to determine appropriate staff development activities. The following paragraphs examine in more detail the specific behaviors of principals in schools where at-risk students are achieving academic success.

1. Principals support teachers' instructional methods and their modifications of instructional approaches and materials.

Just as programs such as bilingual education validate language minority students' native language strengths and thus diminish risk, principals validate teachers' strengths and experiences by supporting their instructional efforts. How do principals do this for teachers?

Principals assume a proactive role in supporting teachers' instructional efforts. They communicate directly and frequently with teachers about instruction and student needs. An example of frequent interaction with teachers is principals making a "conscious effort to interact in a positive manner with every teacher on a daily basis" (Reitzug, 1989, p. 54). Effective principals consistently communicate that academic gains are a priority (Andrews, Soder, & Jacoby, 1986). They interact directly with teachers on instructional issues. Reitzug's (1989) analysis of teacher and principal interactions revealed that in the school where students were achieving there were more interactions dealing with instructional matters. Furthermore, a greater amount of time was spent during those interactions than the time span of conversations of a non-academic nature. Instructional leaders focusing their interactions on primarily instructional topics were also documented by Greenfield (1991). Moreover, these principals not only discussed academic issues, they guided, encouraged, reinforced, and promoted teachers' instructional efforts (Venezky & Winfield, 1979). Cuban (1989) found that such principals were flexible and supportive with teachers' efforts to adapt, modify, or adjust instructional approaches to meet the needs of students. Sizemore, Brossard, and Harrigan (1983) reported that in a high achieving, predominantly African-American elementary school, teaching assignments were matched with teachers' expertise for meeting the needs of students. Support for the teachers' instructional efforts occurs because these instructional leaders are cognizant of what the teachers are doing. They are aware because they are involved.

2. Principals allocate resources and materials.

Teachers address students' basic needs when they provide pencils and paper to students. Likewise, principals provide a service to teachers' basic instructional needs by allocating resources and materials.

When instructional leaders know what is happening in classrooms, they are better able and willing to provide resources and materials that support teachers' instructional efforts. Andrews, Soder, and Jacoby (1986) called this "mobilizing resources" (p. 2) and described it as rallying personnel, building, district, and community resources, including materials as well as information. Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides (1990) reported that one of the variables determining high achieving schools was the principal's assistance to teachers in acquiring needed instructional resources. Attending to the materials needed, the "utilization of instructional resources to achieve maximal student outcomes" was a characteristic identified by Venezky and Winfield (1979, p. 7). Providing the "assured

availability" of materials by designating personnel to provide the necessary materials to individual teachers was a leadership behavior reported by Levine and Stark (1982).

3. Principals frequently visit classrooms for instructional purposes.

School practices of regular communication with parents promote attention to students' progress. Similarly when principals frequently visit classrooms, they provide attention to teachers' efforts and progress in instructional matters.

To gain knowledge of what is occurring in classrooms and the materials being used, effective principals frequently observe teachers' instructional methods. Sizemore, Brossard, and Harrigan (1983) used the label of "rigorous supervision" (p. 7) and discussed the importance of established routines such as "the supervision of teacher and staff performance by daily visitations, private conferences, prompt evaluations and provision of assistance" (p. 3). Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides (1990) reported that one of the leadership behaviors common in high achieving schools was the principals' direct supervision of instructional strategies. Andrews, Soder, and Jacoby (1986) described the principals as "a visible presence" (p. 3) in the classroom.

4. Principals solicit and provide feedback on instructional methods and techniques.

When principals interact with teachers about classroom efforts, they are communicating with teachers about the instructional process just as teachers interact with students about their progress. Such two way communication is critical in establishing a climate of collaboration.

Opportunities to interact with teachers on instructional issues increase as principals become a frequent visitor in the classroom. Reitzug's (1989) analysis of teacher and principal interactions demonstrated that teachers in schools with improved student performance more frequently requested the principal's help on instructional matters than the teachers in low performing schools. Providing follow-up comments to assist teachers' improvement was one of the variables characterizing high achieving schools reported by Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides (1990). In addition to gaining first-hand knowledge of the instructional approaches being used by the staff, principals who are frequent classroom visitors become more aware of the daily challenges and constraints that teachers encounter (Greenfield, 1991). This information enhances the principals' ability to practice instructional leadership that leads to student academic gains.

5. Principals use data to focus attention on improving the curriculum or instructional approach to maximize student achievement.

At-risk students greatly benefit from using computer-assisted-instruction programs that provide data-based feedback and maintain individual student records of performance. Similarly, when principals use data about trends in students' performance to adjust the curriculum or instructional practices being used, instruction is maximized.

In schools where at-risk students are achieving at high levels, principals structure time to evaluate and monitor students' progress, and lead staff efforts in designing focused instructional approaches to meet the special and specific needs of students. They work in concert with the teachers to review, modify, and adjust their instructional efforts.

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